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ABSTRACT

Difficulties facing rural special education efforts are examined. Transportation difficulties hinder home-school communication and mitigate against coordination with teacher training institutions. Economic aspects--including the effects of sociocultural attitudes and the lack of trained teachers--and sociopolitical factors in the rural community are explored. Preservice competency areas for rural special educators are reviewed (including facilitating interagency cooperation and consulting with rural peer professionals). The report concludes with a list of 17 recommendations for teacher training, such as a focus on leadership skills, active recruitment of teachers interested in rural teaching, and incorporation of rural and bilingual chapters in introductory special education texts. (CL)

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SERVING EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN IN RURAL AMERICA: THE ONE ROOM SCHOOL HOUSE REVISITED

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Serving Exceptional Children in Rural America:

The One Room School House Revisited

Louise F. Burton and Janice A. Chavez

One of the pressing issues currently facing special education is the development and delivery of quality educational programs for exceptional students in rural areas (Kirk & Gallegher, 1983). The problems associated with rural special education are numerous, complex and interrelated, and generally fall into the following three general categories: (1) geographic: those problems associated with the physical characteristics of the environment; (2) economic: those problems related to the financial resources available in the community; (3) socio-political: those problems regarding the social climate of the area. Determining means to overcome these problems require coordinated efforts by energetic and committed individuals, including teachers, parents, school personnel and teacher trainers. This paper examines issues and problems in rural special education and provides recommendations for improvement in service delivery and teacher training.

Geographic factors

Rural education is no longer characterized by the one room school house. Between 1950 and 1970 consolidation of small schools into larger districts resulted in a reduction of one room schools from 60,000 to 2,000 (Halpern, 1982). Although today there are few one room school houses, 75% of all schools in the United States are located in rural areas (Helge, 1984). Thus, the majority of handicapped students are educated in rural schools. These schools are characterized by diversity in numbers of enrolled students, types of handicaps served, size of community, distance between schools, population per square mile, and

type of geographic area. Accessibility to resources, support personnel and teacher training programs also differ greatly among schools in rural areas. Each rural school is unique, yet there are well recognized similarities among the problems which they seek to overcome. A significant number of rural special education problems are related to geographic characteristics of the area. Dramatic and frequently unpredictable climate conditions serve as obstacles preventing delivery of appropriate services to handicapped students. Harsh weather conditions vary from desert heat and severe wind storms to icy roads and heavy snow storms. In some districts, handicapped students are bussed to distant centralized schools on muddy dirt roads or across awesome mountains--at enormous cost in time and effort. For the severely handicapped and medically fragile students time in route intensifies transportation problems. Where students live great distances from one another and the school, even scheduling for use of specially equipped busses is difficult.

Distance also deters communication between home and school. In accordance to the provisions of PL 94-142, parents must be involved at each step of the referral process. However, rural families who live in remote locations may not have access to telephone or door-to-door mail service. The only means of contact may be visits to the student's home, thus creating additional complications.

Distance and transportation concerns also mitigate against coordination with teacher training institutions. Ongoing staff training and access to resources available through the university is seldom possible. Further, few teacher trainees elect to do their field placement in inconveniently located rural schools. It is recognized that many of the aforementioned geographical problems affect school service for nonhandicapped students, however in the case of special education, the problems are amplified.

Economic factors are the most pervasive of the problems in rural special education and interrelated with political and geographic issues. Without

adequate financial support, school districts are not capable of delivering the quantity and the quality of services to meet the needs of rural exceptional children. Development and maintenance of quality programs requires districts to make a financial commitment to recruit and retain competent teachers. A survey conducted by Helge (1984) asked 200 special education administrators in rural school districts from 50 states to rank the importance of rural special education problems. Results of the respondents identified funding inadequacies (74%), difficulties in recruiting (66%) and retaining (64%) staff as major problems in providing adequate services. Additionally, only 17% of the districts stated that they had an adequate number of special education personnel. There is a general consensus that low salaries, inadequate housing and social isolation discourage qualified school personnel from working and residing in rural communities (Helge, 1981; Kirmer, Lockwood, Mickler & Sweeny, 1984; Kelly & Vanvactor, 1984). In many rural schools, staff positions are left unfilled for years or are filled by inexperienced recruits who soon leave for other opportunities.

Economics also plays a major role in the sociocultural attitudes, values and life styles of rural residents. Economic problems, common to many rural individuals, are magnified in the case of the migrant exceptional child and their family whose survival depends on movement from one rural setting to another. Poverty and hardship are a very real part of a migrant child's life. As indicated by Hunter (1982) and Barresi (1982), a typical migrant worker earns an annual income of less than $2,000; has a life expectancy of 49 years as compared to the national average of 73; is likely to experience malnutrition; and often resides in inadequate housing. These problems are further complicated by cultural and linguistic differences as a large percentage (74.7%) of the migrant population is Hispanic who may speak primarily Spanish (Hunter, 1982). With mandatory provisions stated in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and

P.L. 94-142, school districts are responsible to enforce nondiscriminatory assessment, due process, parental consent and appropriate individualized programming for all special education students, including the culturally and linguistically different. Implementing these provisions is particulary difficult if school personnel do not speak the language of the home or child, the parents are illiterate in English or Spanish, or the parents are unfamiliar with educational terms and procedures. In these cases, interactions with the school can be threatening and frustrating experiences for exceptional children and their families.

The nature of the migrant life style can affect the child's success in school. Seasonal work done by migrant laborers requires frequent relocations. The children of migrants (also includes military, foster care, the affluent) consequently receive a fragmented and inconsistent education in a school system planned around the nontransient student (Barresi, 1982). The unfortunate result however, is an interruption in learning, health care, training, teacher-student rapport and personal relationships (Barresi, 1982).

These conditions caused by poverty and transience have contributed to the high incidence of handicaps among rural school children. However, half of the 10,000 school districts in the United States have less than 300 students (Halpern, 1982), thus reducing the probability of having a significant number of low incidence handicaps to justify program implementation. As federal and state funds are based on actual special education enrollment and are thereby dependent on average daily attendance for fiscal resources, school districts in rural areas are severely affected by the transient student.

Socio-political factors

The socio-political climate of any community is directly influenced by the attitude and behavior of the constituency. Rural citizens are frequently characterized in such terms as, proud, self-sufficient, loyal or traditional.

Although there is inherent danger in stereotyping any population, a discussion of attitudes credited to rural individuals provides some basis for further understanding the rural situation as it applies to special education. This is especially important in the case of rural citizens, as their attitudes are frequently inconsistent with those valued by the American educational system--a reflection of the larger society.

Rural populations have also been typified as being wary of change. In the rural community, the significance placed on tradition and "the way things have always been" is a major contributor to the reluctance toward innovation in schools. To examine these prevailing attitudes, Helge (1981) surveyed 38% of the nation's state agencies serving rural residents. She found that state officials ranked attitudinal variables as an important issue schools and agencies must recognize when implementing special education programs. In particular, resistance to change was mentioned by 88% of the state agencies. This is especially important when one considers the flexibility schools must exhibit in response to technological advances and legislative mandates. In another study of attitudes, Tunick, et. al. (1980) investigated community attitudes toward the handicapped by comparing responses of rural and nonrural residents. Results revealed that the rural group possessed less accepting and less positive attitudes toward handicapped persons. If innovation is to occur, there must be a change in attitudes of those in the community. For rural areas, this requires maintaining the basic integrity of the community, while at the same time fostering attitudes which enhance appropriate service delivery for exceptional children.

Teacher Training

Local school districts confront a multitude of problems associated with the delivery of services to exceptional children in rural and sparcely populated areas. Retention, recruiting and retraining sufficient numbers of qualified

personnel to effectively serve this unique group of students is difficult. Marrs (1984) identified three types of prospective and practicing teachers likely to teach in rural special education programs: (1) those who grew up in the rural area, like it, and will stay there, (2) those forced into special education with a temporary certificate because they live in an area where no other teaching positions are available, and (3) those who have no knowledge or interest in the rural community, accept a special education position, yet have no intention of remaining. Thus, the most successful recruitment efforts frequently result in nonretention as the type 2 and 3 teachers did not intend to remain in the area.

Sontag & Button (1980) support the need for personnel able to adjust to isolated rural districts yet few teacher training programs focus on rural issues and concerns. As a result, an insufficient number of personnel have the necessary teaching competencies and preservice experience specific to rural special education (Horn, 1981). In reference to teacher training needs in rural areas, Helge (1983) surveyed 200 rural teacher-training programs in 50 states which indicated an overwhelming agreement (100%) that "rural training" was acquired on-the-job. In the same survey, 62 of the interviewees reported a lack of rural exposure and experiences with rural handicapped in their teacher training programs. The respondees further stated that they were unprepared to cope with the remoteness to services and resources (68%) and lacked specific techniques to use in the absence of specialists (66%).

In response to these and other needs, the National Rural Project developed the following preservice competency areas relative to rural special education (Marrs, 1984):

(1) The Rural Special Education Context

(2) Differences in Serving Rural vs. Urban Handicapped Students

(3) The State of the Art of Rural Special Education

(4) Effective Service Delivery Systems

(5) Creative Resource Identification

(6) Working with Parents

(7) Facilitating Interagency Cooperation

(8) Personal Coping Skills and Professional Development

(9) Consultation with Rural Peer Professionals.

To further understand the complexity of providing special education services in rural areas, research efforts must continue. Effective service delivery models must be developed, tested and reported for possible replication in other rural settings. Unique techniques utilized in teacher training programs should also be made available to other institutions of higher education committed to preparing quality rural educators. Through the conserted efforts, viable solutions to the problems and issues in rural special education will be achieved.

Recommendations

The national and local needs of rural special educators must be considered when designing teacher training programs which enhance service delivery to exceptional students. Based on the analysis of issues in rural special education the recommendations are as follows:

1. Active recruitment of teacher trainees who live in rural areas, are interested in a special education position and who intend to work in a rural setting.
2. Develop leadership skills (advocacy, parent training, inservice or seminar coordinators) in prospective and practicing rural teachers.
3. Encourage collaboration of university staff, school district personnel, parents and students to enhance communication and cooperation.
4. Maximize use of existing resources with decreased dependence on commercial materials and expertise, which is seldom available in rural areas.

5. Increase offerings of outreach courses taught in locations convenient to rural teachers.
6. Sensitize students to needs of rural and culturally and linguistically different exceptional students.
7. Incorporate a rural special education component in the basic mainstreaming course.
8. Develop competency based curricula which include rural special education competencies.
9. Teacher training coursework should not only emphasize the acquisition of knowledge and skills but also the development of positive attitudes toward rural handicapped students.
10. Incorporate rural and bilingual chapters in texts on introduction to special education.
11. Coursework requirements should include selected readings, projects, guest lectures, research and other related assignments on rural special education.
12. Insure that basic mainstreaming courses emphasize characteristics and related methods which may be applied by regular education teachers without aid of specialists.
13. Preservice and inservice workshops for rural areas should incorporate hands on activities and demonstration teaching as opposed to the lecture format.
14. Develop placements and incentives for teacher trainees in rural areas.
15. Preservice teachers should be encouraged to use flexible strategies and creative problem solving in devising means to better serve the rural handicapped child.

16. Develop a file of resources (books, materials, films, bibliographies, journals) related to rural special education.

17. Disseminate information on availability of rural resources to local and state agencies.

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